



Soldiers and guardsmen escorted the Little Rock Nine for the entire school year.



Students still attend Central High School, which is closed to park visitors except for rganized tour groups.





Elizabeth Eckford walked a twoblock-long gauntlet of threats and

# **Year of Reckoning**

The school desegregation crisis at Little Rock Central High School put on trial America's commitment to its founding principles. It was the first significant test of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board* of Education that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The successful outcome affirmed the basis of that ruling—the 14th Amendment's promise of "equal protection of the laws."

What became a defining moment in the South's "massive resistance" to school desegregation began quietly enough with a plan by Little Rock's school board to gradually integrate the city's schools. But Orval Faubus, the populist governor of Arkansas with a reputation for relative moderation on racial issues, undercut local officials. Race was playing an increasing role in Arkansas politics, and Faubus was looking ahead to running for reelection in 1958. His actions turned ordered desegregation into violent confrontation.

Crying "states' rights" and floating rumors about planned violence, Faubus justified calling out the National Guard to keep order-by blocking the entry of nine African American students. Faubus also cited concern for their safety, but before the eyes of guardsmen, mobs followed, spat on, and threatened violence to the students. Later,

after a court had ordered the National Guard withdrawn, and with only police to control the situation, an angry crowd beat both black and white journalists.

In the weeks before the students gained entry under the protection of U.S. Army troops, the governor's defiance and legal maneuvering stoked a constitutional crisis. A growing media presence made this an ongoing news event played out on the country's TV screens. But while Little Rock became the face of the nation's desegregation troubles of the 1950s and 60s, the struggle for equal rights enacted there transcended region, race, and historical period. The struggle continues, and the commitment and courage shown by the Little Rock students is still needed if history is not to be repeated.

# **Constitutional Struggle**

### **Governor Faubus**

Spurred by other southern politicians and his own constituents to take a stand against desegregation, Faubus insisted that in Brown v. Board the Supreme Court had overstepped its constitutional authority. He invoked what he called constitutionally guaranteed states' rights to back his use of the National Guard to bar African American students from Central High. By so doing he directly challenged the federal government.





Although not an aggressive enforcer of civil rights, Eisenhower believed deeply in the rule of law, the Constitution, and the appropriate use of military force. When Governor Faubus used armed quardsmen to defy a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, Eisenhower had no choice but to back constitutionally granted judicial and executive authority. He was the first president since

Reconstruction to use federal

troops to enforce civil rights.

1959

**President Eisenhower** 

"The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me by every legal means at my command."

—President Dwight Eisenhower, in telegram to Governor Faubus

# ROCK, SEPTEMBER 1957



September 2

**Governor Faubus** orders National Guard to bar Afrischool for their "safety."



On first day of school mob gathers (above). Little Rock can Americans from Time do not appear



Guardsmen bar black students from entering school. Eckford is turned away (above) she is harassed by mob.

of NAACP

equal rights.

Federal judge rules against use of National Guard to Little Rock police are given responsibility for protecting the students.

Little Rock Nine enter the school; police cannot mainensues and the students leave from a side entrance in a police car.

President Eisenhower federalizes Arkansas National Guard and sends 1,200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (above) to Little Rock.



Faubus appears on

television, saying

"We are now an

African American students enter Central High escorted

101st Airborne Division leaves in "If parents

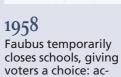
would just go home and let us alone, we'll be all right . . . . We can do it."

—White female Central High student



May 25, 1958

Ernest Green (above) is the first African American to gradu-High School. Green says: "It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations first hand."



do, thereby closing

schools for the 1958-

59 year). Sign erect-

ed by Little Rock citi-

### 1959 Federal court de-

clares closings unconstitutional. reject it (which they August. Three African Americans attend Central High School, including Jefferson Thomas zens is shown above. and Carlotta Walls.

# U.S. SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

### 1849 Roberts v. The City of Boston

Supreme Court upholds segregated schools; provides precedent for Plessy v. Ferguson.

## 1881 Tuskegee Institute

Booker T. Washington founds school for African Americans. His emphasis on trades disturbs some African American leaders.

#### 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson

Supreme Court estab-**National Association** lishes "separate but for the Advancement equal" doctrine of Colored People (NAACP) looks to courts to achieve

#### 1909 Formation 1936 Univ. of Maryland v. Murray

Maryland supreme court orders university's law school to admit African American student.

# 1946 Mendez v. Westminster

Ends segregation of Latino students in Orange County, Calif., schools.

## 1950 Sweatt v. **Painter**

Supreme Court finds that "separate but equal" is unattainable in higher education.

## 1954 Brown v. Board of Education

Supreme Court overturns "separate but equal" doctrine. Brown II (1955) mandates—though

November. Little

Rock Nine endure

physical and verbal

abuse inroughout

the year.

Six-year-old African ambiguously—desegregation with "all deliberate speed.

American girl desegregates New Orleans elementary school, escorted through mob by federal marshals

### 1960 Ruby Bridges 1972 Detroit **Busing Plan**

Busing plan is reversed in 1974 by Supreme Court (Millikin v. Bradley), affirming that courts could not remedy "white flight."

### 1976 Boston Anti-**Busing Riots**

Residents of South Boston riot in response to court-ordered